

## BIRTH-CONTROL AND EUGENICS.<sup>1</sup>

*By* HAVELOCK ELLIS.

BIRTH-CONTROL is nowadays discussed from many points of view. There is, for instance, that standpoint of economic doctrine which furnished the old Malthusian basis for the limitation of offspring; the production of human life, it was held, tends to outstrip the production of the food needed to sustain life, so that, unless procreation is restrained, Nature steps in to attain the same end more disastrously by wars, pestilences, and famines. That argument is still a fruitful source of debate, the most careful investigators seeming to acknowledge in this contention an element of truth, although not accepting Malthus's law in the strict form in which it was first proclaimed.

Then there is the evolutionary or zoological point of view. Along this line of argument it has been shown how the whole course of natural progress has consisted in the imposition of checks on the immense reproductive impetus acquired at the beginning of life. Throughout the course of evolution there has been a progressive diminution in the quantity of offspring—comparatively few of which in the lowlier forms of life succeed in surviving—and this diminution in quantity is accompanied by an increase in quality which insures far greater chances of survival. Birth-control is a continuation of the same evolutionary process, become conscious, voluntary, and deliberate; it is, therefore, altogether natural.

Then there is the humanitarian standpoint of social reform; here we find the democratic argument which appeals to the champions of Labour, and is the most widely popular of all in this matter. Anyone, indeed, who is acquainted with the lives and homes of the workers, even in the richest and most progressive countries, knows the misery produced by an excess of

<sup>1</sup> It should be understood that the Council of the Eugenics Education Society has not decided either in favour of or against the views expressed in this article. The Editors consider, however, that all eugenic aspects of these questions should be fairly stated.

children who are unwanted and cannot be properly provided for. We find undue strain on the fathers, the exhaustion and ill-health of the mothers, and the worst possible conditions for the care of the children, many of whom ought never to have been born, while a large proportion die soon after birth.<sup>1</sup> Hence in all directions radiating centres of wretchedness exert a depressing influence on the whole social level of a community. This is the standpoint of those noble-hearted pioneers who are determined at all costs to free society from a shameful stain.

Very different is the attitude of those who take the purely medical standpoint in relation to birth-control. They do not commit themselves to any wide generalisation, but merely assert that in certain diseased conditions when pregnancy would involve serious risks—as in some forms of heart disease or when a woman is liable to puerperal insanity—it is imperative to use contraceptives. This standpoint has been recognised by enlightened physicians for over half a century.

Finally—and distinct from the evolutionary, economic, social, and medical outlooks—there is the eugenic standpoint. It is not a new standpoint. But to-day, when so many of the chief branches of the white stock are being sapped in their racial vitality by influences of previously unknown virulence—for even the great pestilences of old at all events spared the strongest—this aspect of the problem assumes the gravest significance of all.

That we possess in birth-control an invaluable instrument, not merely for immediate social betterment, but for the elevation of the race, is tacitly admitted to-day by nearly all thoughtful eugenicists, though they often refrain from emphasising the fact. The reason they thus refrain is that they recognise that the prevention of conception, by itself, however beneficial it may be in improving social conditions, has no necessary improving effect on the race, and may even act in the reverse direction. This is evident. A merely random restriction of the fertility of a stock, without reference to the racial qualities of the stock, cannot

<sup>1</sup> As regards England, I may specially refer to the pictures presented by the letters of 160 working women brought together by the Women's Co-operative Guild in a little volume entitled *Maternity*. These letters, which are published without reference to birth-control, are by no means written by working women of the lowest class, but they present many pathetic situations due to over-large families, and constant laments of the awful results of the writers' ignorance in sex matters.

possibly improve the stock's quality. In actual practice, moreover, as carried on at present, Neo-Malthusian methods may even be dysgenic rather than eugenic, for they tend to be adopted by the superior stocks, while the inferior stocks, ignorant and reckless, are left to propagate freely. This unfortunate result is encouraged by the notorious failure—still so conspicuous amongst us—to spread the knowledge of contraceptives among the classes which from the eugenic standpoint most urgently need them. It is obvious that the present state of things in this matter could not indefinitely continue, for it means that while the classes that impose social burdens continue to pile up those burdens at the same rate, the classes that bear social burdens are relatively diminishing in number and are therefore forced to bear an ever greater burden. In proportion as we realise this vital fact we shall work ever more zealously to spread the knowledge of contraceptive measures among those classes whose fatal fertility it is necessary to arrest.

Putting aside this temporary and transitional aspect of the question, it is important to remember that while the mere limitation of offspring is not in itself a method by which the eugenic selection of the race can be secured, birth-control yet remains the only instrument by means of which that eugenic selection can be rendered practicable. When Malthus, more than a century ago, put forward his new and revolutionary doctrine concerning the need to limit the production of offspring for economic reasons, he knew of no better method for carrying out the recommendation than abstention from sexual intercourse. In any case it is probable that at that period continence was the only method of limiting the size of a family which a respectable Anglican clergyman could admit. But it was not a practical method. The number of married people who from any motive, and especially from any eugenic motive in which their own personal welfare was not concerned, could exercise the unselfish self-control necessary to carry out such a method must be very small, while people capable of obeying such lofty motives and possessed of the will-power needed to do so effectually are, from the eugenic standpoint, the very last people whom we should desire to limit their families unduly. The method of birth-control by the use of

contraceptive measures is the one and only method which places in the hands of the whole population possessed of ordinary care and prudence the complete power to regulate, limit, or, if necessary, altogether prevent, the production of offspring, while yet enabling the functions of married life to be exercised, without any vain struggles to attain an ascetic ideal or any wasteful impoverishment of physical or spiritual well-being.

Here, clearly, we have the key to the eugenic position. The pioneers of eugenics, while realising the gravity of the problem they were setting forth, usually left it in the air, out of reach of any driving force. Even Galton, the first and greatest of these pioneers, who was always so reasonable and so temperate in his statements of the objects and aims of eugenics, never emphasised, or even clearly set forth, the nature of the method by which alone eugenics could become practical. Galton nearly always spoke as though procreation and marriage were the same thing, so that persons unfit to propagate the race were therefore unfit to marry, and must be excluded altogether from all the personal benefits, physical and spiritual, of the marriage sacrament. That was clearly an impracticable demand, scarcely to be allowed by social opinion, and placing an intolerable burden on many of the best people. The inevitable result was that eugenics was constantly misunderstood, ridiculed, regarded as a fad, while even many of its would-be followers ventured to take up impossible and absurd positions, thereby still further discrediting the eugenic doctrine.

Only a few years, however, after Galton first began to put forward the new ideas concerning the better breeding of the race, in 1885, Miss J. H. Clapperton, a friend of George Eliot's, in her *Scientific Meliorism*, clearly indicated that the voluntary restraint of procreation by Neo-Malthusian methods, apart from economic and prudential motives, is a necessary condition for "national regeneration." It may well be that this was the first definite public intimation that in birth-control we have the key that unlocks the eugenic door and lays open to human practice a region which is otherwise only accessible to the theorist, if not the faddist. Since then that realisation has quickly spread among all who think seriously in this department of life. At the

present day it is only the ignorant and the superstitious, including doubtless many would-be legislators, who really imagine that procreation is one with marriage, and that there is no way of affecting procreation except through the prohibition of marriage. All those to-day who are deeply concerned in the great problem of eugenic progress assume, as a matter of course, that the only practical instrument by which eugenics can work is birth-control. Only by the regulation, limitation, and if necessary, prevention of conception, in the light of our gradually increasing knowledge of heredity, can we hope to raise satisfactorily the general level of the race.

The two fundamental eugenic aims—more urgent to-day than they have ever been before—are to impede the production of bad stocks and to favour the production of good stocks. The prevention of bad stocks may be put first, not only because it is the most promising line of progress, but because in itself it indirectly, and even directly, favours the development of the good stocks. Leaving aside those unequal social and economic conditions which, we may hope, will in the future become more and more levelled towards equality, from the eugenic standpoint the community may be roughly divided into two groups, the capable and the incapable. They overlap and gradually merge into each other. But in the well-marked shape they are two great and opposed groups. The influences of to-day, and even perhaps of the greater part of the last century—including the best and most altruistic impulses—have impeded the development of the capable group and favoured the development of the incapable group. Our social progress has largely consisted in the fulfilment, not only in philanthropy, but in law and administration, of the doctrine that the capable shall bear the burdens of the incapable. It thus comes about that the vigorous, hard-working and prudent people assume ever-growing financial and other burdens which limit their powers to do justice to their own children, while rendering it more possible for the lazy, the improvident, and the diseased to live in ease they have not earned, to procreate their own kind, and to escape the natural results of their own laziness, improvidence, and disease. This process has long been going on, and the more rapidly in the

most civilised and progressive countries, which thus set themselves to work to retard their own progress and to diminish their civilisation. But the great war of to-day threatens, in all the belligerent countries and even by its reactions in the neutral countries, to render a chronic process acute. The capable group finds itself greatly reduced in numbers, while at the same time its burdens are enormously increased; the incapable group is expanding, not only because it finds itself more than ever unfit to deal with its harsher environment, but because many of those who belonged to the great intermediate zone, and even many who once were capable, are being forced to sink to this lower social stage.

Now no one seriously proposes that the capable, however intolerably heavy their burdens may become, should throw off those burdens and leave the incapable to their fate. That would be to renounce all those humanising ideals and efforts which have been in active operation for over a century and more slowly and silently for a vastly longer period. Until recent years, indeed, there seemed no choice. And it still remains true that we must continue to succour the unfortunate who are actually with us. But now a great hope for the race has begun to glimmer before our eyes. We begin, that is, to discern that by the judicious use of the instrument of birth-control, in the light of an ever-growing knowledge of the eugenic aspects of heredity, it is possible—and that not in some dim millennium but in the immediate future that will soon be with us—to cut off the supply of the unfortunate and to diminish steadily the output of incapables. Like the wizard's lazy apprentice who foolishly released the stream he could not control, we have struggled vainly to stem the tide of unfit babies, and now at last we have learnt the magic formula to apply at the source.

In view of these considerations, what, it may be asked, are the lines of action we ought to follow? Without waiting for any great national or collective movements there seem to be at least three directions in which we may work, even individually, towards rendering eugenic ideals effective in social and racial life.

I. *By increasing and promoting the knowledge of the laws of heredity.* Knowledge must come before action, and our

knowledge of the tendencies of heredity in its bearing on eugenics—whether pursued along biometrical lines or Mendelian lines, or simply by careful observation apart from theory—is still far from adequate. It is rapidly growing and becoming more orderly, but in order to be a guide to conduct its basis must be extended to cover an enormous number of cases; it must become still more detailed and still more precise. While the expert biological investigator may be expected to take the chief part in this extension of knowledge, it is by no means confined to him. Every physician meets with cases of family heredity which it would be desirable to explore, so far as may be possible, and it is his duty to put them on record. Without going outside one's own family, indeed, provided one can trace backwards for a few generations, it is possible to draw a picture, even if only for one's private edification, for example or for warning; while those of us who can follow our ancestors backwards for several centuries may find in our hands a study full alike of fascination and instruction. /

II. *By popularising a knowledge of the methods of birth-control.* A knowledge of the methods of limiting offspring by the use of contraceptives, which in the eighteenth century seems still to have been confined to the rakes of the fashionable world and only used for immoral purposes, began about a century ago to be associated with moral and prudential motives. Since then it has steadily tended to spread in all civilised countries throughout the world. Naturally, it began among the most educated and enlightened classes, among those most sensitive to the moral considerations involved by the responsibilities of parenthood, and most capable of forethought and self-restraint in fulfilling these responsibilities. Thus the movement was at first confined to the better social classes. But it has been constantly spreading downwards, a notable extension being specially observed after the publicity of the trial of Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant in 1876 for spreading pamphlets containing information on the use of contraceptives. The literary propaganda stimulated by that trial has continued and grown ever since. It has reached the higher levels of the working-class, sufficiently intelligent, enterprising, and inquisitive to secure information which concerns them so

much, even where obstacles are placed in the way of its dissemination by prudery or obscurantism. The propaganda, however much it continues to spread laterally, has now probably reached almost as far downwards as it can reach by literary methods, for it is approaching those social strata which, immersed in labour, if not in drudgery, and without literary inquisitiveness or enterprise, however much they may desire knowledge, offer a barrier to the natural diffusion of knowledge.

Thus it comes about that, in the present stage of transition, the class which contains the largest proportion of capable elements of eugenic value is that which is most willing and best able to limit its output of offspring, while the class which contains the largest proportion of incapable elements is still deprived of the knowledge enabling it to regulate the production of children, even when it possesses the will. This state of transition, as has often been pointed out, is deplorable. Its deplorable results, if long continued, have indeed been emphasised and reiterated with much wringing of hands. And how few of those who have assumed this rhetorical attitude have lifted a finger to remove the difficulty! Yet in this practical matter we have no use for Cassandras who can do nothing but howl. The only thing that will help is to bring the needed knowledge personally to these lower social strata which are impervious to literary propaganda. For we cannot go back. We are in the middle of the stream. Salvation lies in pushing forward. The attitude of those prudish or ignorant obscurantists who exclaim with dignified superiority: "But I disapprove of such methods *in toto!*" has now become ridiculous. They are no longer of our time. They belong to the past, and the Great War has sealed their fate. We of to-day are aware that we are concerned with a great and firmly established movement of world-wide extension, a movement which continues, in the highest civilisation of every land, a process which began in the lowest zoological series and has its sanction in Nature.

The exact line of action must vary in accordance with the circumstances in a particular country. In a country like Holland, where birth-control clinics are not only established, but officially encouraged, the road lies easily open for the most enlightened



eugenic teaching. In a country like England, where the chief barrier is official inertia supported by that prudish and ignorant obscurantism to which attention has already been called, the paths of action are manifold both for the physician and the enlightened public, by dissipating ignorance, by giving private instruction, by inculcating higher racial ideals, and by stimulating local authorities to a sense of their responsibility. There cannot be the slightest doubt that it is a primary duty of Poor Law relieving officers (especially when, as is now becoming the case, these officers are women and of higher type than was formerly usual) to give instruction in birth-control, when necessary, as a matter of the most urgent importance. This is obviously needed not only in the interests of the poor themselves, but in the interests of the community, even apart altogether from the race. In the United States the problem is at present rather more difficult. Here a barrier has been erected by the law. The result has been that heroic pioneers, like Mrs. Margaret Sanger, in a generous passion of humanitarian ardour, have flung defiance at the laws. The method of reforming bad laws by breaking them is not that which commends itself to an instinctively law-abiding community, even when the law-breaker is inspired by the noblest motives. But the fact that it should be necessary to break a law in order to carry out so exalted a task as that of working for humanity and for the elevation of the race, is itself an outrage on something even higher than law. In educating the community and in re-moulding the law in accordance with that education there is evidently still room for much work in America.

III. *By acting in accordance with our knowledge.* It is not enough to acquire a knowledge of the laws of heredity. It is not enough to spread a knowledge of the methods of birth-control. Each of these separately, however desirable, will scarcely effect much for the practical eugenic elevation of mankind. It is only when they are combined, in the light of a high sense of personal responsibility, to become a guiding motive of action, that the task is achieved. For this high sense of responsibility, directed towards individual action, lies at the root of the whole matter. Only so far as it is attained by an ever larger proportion of

the community is eugenic progress either possible or desirable. In that attainment all is attained.

This means that we need not trouble over-much concerning hasty eugenic legislation and the legal regulation of marriage. No doubt such legislation and regulation will from time to time be attempted, with whatever success, in new and crude communities. They have brought on eugenists the charge of being faddists and cranks. They may be disregarded. The lines of eugenic progress are clear. There will be time to invoke compulsion and the law when sound knowledge has become universal, and when we are quite sure that those who refuse to act in accordance with sound knowledge refuse deliberately or because they are congenitally incapable of doing anything else. These constitute the irreducible nucleus of the incapable group. They are at once a real anti-social danger and a focus of racial poisons. But they are a comparatively small and entirely manageable number of persons. It is on this nucleus that we not only may, but must, apply such degree of pressure as may be necessary, alike in the interests of the community of to-day and the race of to-morrow. This pressure may in the mildest degree consist of such elementary social inducements as the group may be amenable to, proceeding to sterilisation when these inducements fail, and in the ultimate and extreme degree to complete segregation. It is along such lines as these, and not by any fatuous and futile methods of imposing compulsion on the community at large, that we may reasonably expect eugenic progress.

We can, each of us, individually, work towards this goal. The radiating effects of definite enlightenment and of personal influence will steadily make clearer the precise boundaries of the nucleus we have to destroy. The present crisis in the history of the race is a challenge to our best endeavours. The time for vain discussion is over. The day for action has arrived which will never dawn again.